Washington State Institute for Public Policy

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Who Uses Crisis Residential Centers in Washington State?

—Working Paper—

In 1995, Washington State policymakers established new services for at-risk and runaway youth intended to preserve the safety of children and help families reconcile. These policies, commonly known as the "Becca Bill," included court intervention and assessments for at-risk youth and mandatory treatment for youth with chemical dependency problems. The Becca Bill also established secure crisis residential centers (semi-secure centers have been in place since 1980). Crisis Residential Centers (CRCs) are state programs that provide a maximum five-day placement for runaway youth or youth in conflict with their families. CRC staff help youth stabilize their current situation by connecting children and families to counseling and treatment services.

The 2000 Washington State Legislature directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (Institute) to examine the criminal, substance abuse, and educational outcomes of youth who have stayed in crisis residential centers (CRCs). The Institute will report on these outcomes by December 2001. As an interim publication, this paper addresses the following questions about CRC utilization:

- ✓ What is the status of youth prior to entering a CRC?
- ✓ How many youth stay in CRCs?
- ✓ How long do youth stay in CRCs?

Studying utilization patterns of CRCs highlights operational differences and the effective demand for services in various regions. Since CRCs are reimbursed according to the number of beds in a facility (rather than the number of intakes), future budget decisions may require allocating bed space to high-need centers.

In addition to reporting on the number of youth assisted by CRCs, this paper examines the characteristics and circumstances of runaways coming to CRCs. This background includes the previous living status of runaway youth, length of time spent on the street, and family connections. The final report will examine the youths' experience with the child welfare system and the courts.

The Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) contracts with private organizations and county governments to operate 19 CRCs. Two types of CRCs have been established to assist runaway youth in crisis.

- ✓ ***Secure Crisis Residential Centers*** are locked facilities designed for runaway youth who may be a danger to themselves or others. Law enforcement place youth in secure CRCs after attempts to re-connect the youth with his or her family fail. Nine secure CRCs are currently in operation; the number of contracted beds in each facility ranges from 4 to 20.

- ✓ Parents, DSHS, or law enforcement may place youth in ***Semi-Secure Crisis Residential Centers***. Semi-secure CRCs are intended to provide identical services in a less restrictive environment for youth who are assessed as minimal risk of running from the facility. Twelve semi-secure CRCs are operated throughout the state. These facilities are generally smaller, with 2 to 6 contracted beds per center.

Although all CRCs share the same goal of assisting runaway youth and their families, there are distinct differences between the youth who enter secure and semi-secure facilities. We will look at patterns for both groups before, during, and after a CRC stay.

Where Do CRC Youth Come From?

At the time of intake, CRC staff ask youth a series of questions about their living situation, legal status, and family and personal background. Approximately 40 percent of all CRC youth were living with parents in the seven days before entering the CRC (see Table 1). Youth in secure CRCs were more likely to have lived with friends in the prior week compared with those in semi-secure facilities (28 percent vs. 11 percent). More youth in semi-secure CRCs, however, came from a recent foster care placement (18 percent vs. 10 percent).

Table 1

Living Status of CRC Youth in Week Before Entering CRC: 1998–2000

Living Arrangement in Prior Week	Semi-Secure (percent)	Secure (percent)
Parent(s)	41	39
Friends or Unrelated Adult	11	28
Foster Care or Group Home	18	10
Relatives (other than parents)	8	8
Juvenile Detention or CRC	14	5
All Other (on the street, temporary arrangements, treatment facility)	9	10
Total	100	100

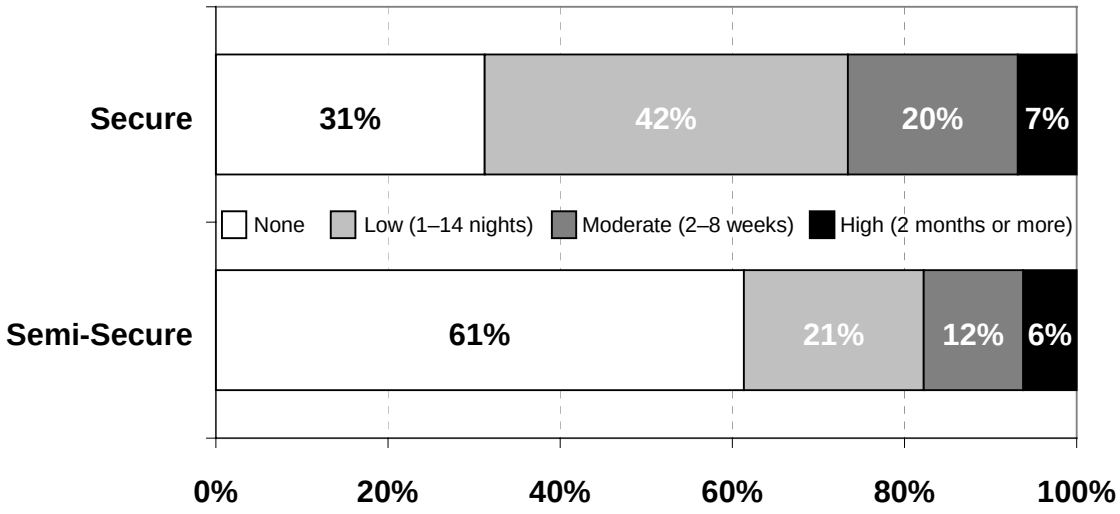
Runaways who were living with their parents the week prior to coming to a CRC stay have by far the most stable living arrangements among all CRC youth. On average, the most recent living situation lasted:

- 3 months for youth who had been living with a friend or unrelated adult;
- 10 months for youth in foster care or group homes;
- 23 months for youth living with relatives (other than parents); and
- 117 months (10 years) for youth living with parents.

In addition to information about recent living situations, CRC staff also ask about the youth's long-term experience on the street or in temporary living arrangements (couch surfing). In the six months prior to entering the CRC, only a small number (6 to 7 percent) of youth had been on the street for 2 months or more. Figure 1 displays total time on the street among runaway youth in the six months prior to entering a CRC.

Figure 1

CRC Youth – Experience on Street in Past Six Months



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As Figure 1 shows, the majority (61 percent) of youth in semi-secure CRCs spent no days on the street in the six months prior to intake. Although only half as many youth (31 percent) in secure CRCs had no street exposure, housing instability among these youth was still relatively low. Twenty-seven percent of youth entering a secure CRC could be considered as having a moderate or high level of time spent on the street (2 weeks or more).

A wide range of family backgrounds can be found among the CRC population. Table 2 shows the different household arrangements of youth in secure and semi-secure CRCs. Very few (15 percent) youth who enter CRCs recently lived with their nuclear family. Thirty-five percent of youth come from single-parent homes, while nearly 40 percent live with either a foster parent or step-parent. In most cases, youth have been away from home for a period of 3 to 8 days before coming to the CRC.

Table 2
With Whom Did CRC Youth Last Live?

Household Type	Number	Percent	Days Since Leaving (Median)
One parent	1,009	35	5
Foster parents or other guardian	548	19	8
Parent and step-parent	538	19	4
Both parents	433	15	3
Relatives (other than parents)	260	9	7
Friends of family / Other	76	3	14
Total	**2,864**		

Note: Few differences in household types exist between secure and semi-secure youth. Both groups are combined here.

From the youth's perspective, 44 percent claim that it is not possible to live with their parents. Table 3 lists the reasons youth mention when asked why they cannot live at home.

Table 3
Why Are CRC Youth Not Living at Home?

Reason for Living Outside Home	Semi-Secure (percent)	Secure (percent)
Youth unwilling to live with parent(s)	18	38
Youth removed from parent custody	41	30
Parent(s) unwilling to live with youth	19	12
Neither party willing to live with other	10	8
Parent(s) not living or in an institution	7	6
Other	5	5
Total	**100**	**100**

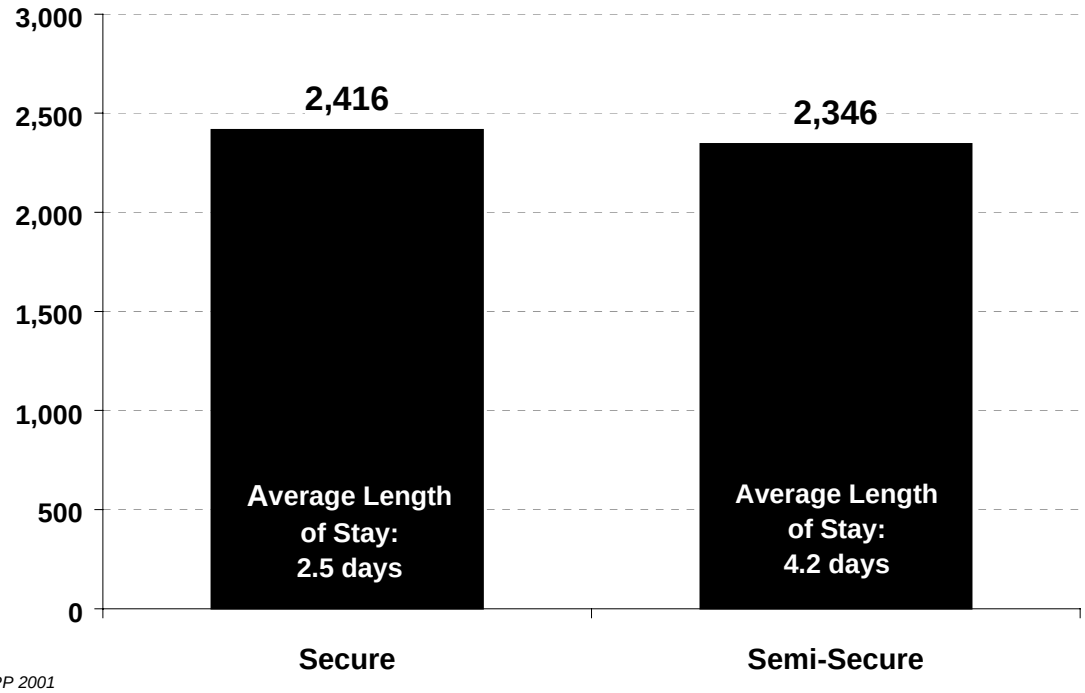
Youth in secure CRCs are more than likely to refuse to live with their parent(s) or guardians. A larger number of youth in semi-secure CRCs, on the other hand, remain disconnected as a result of the parent or another party (such as courts).

It should also be noted that a majority (61 percent) of CRC youth report that they cannot live with extended family members. In most cases, relatives are either unavailable or unwilling to have the youth live with them.

How Many Youth Stay in Crisis Residential Centers?

Crisis residential centers allow runaway youth to stay in a short-term, stable living environment while professional staff helps the family work toward reconciliation. The CRC stay is also an opportunity to connect the youth and family with appropriate, ongoing services. Between October 1999 and December 2000, there were nearly 5,000 intakes to CRCs. Total intakes were evenly divided between secure and semi-secure facilities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Number and Length of Stays in Crisis Residential Centers
October 1999–December 2000



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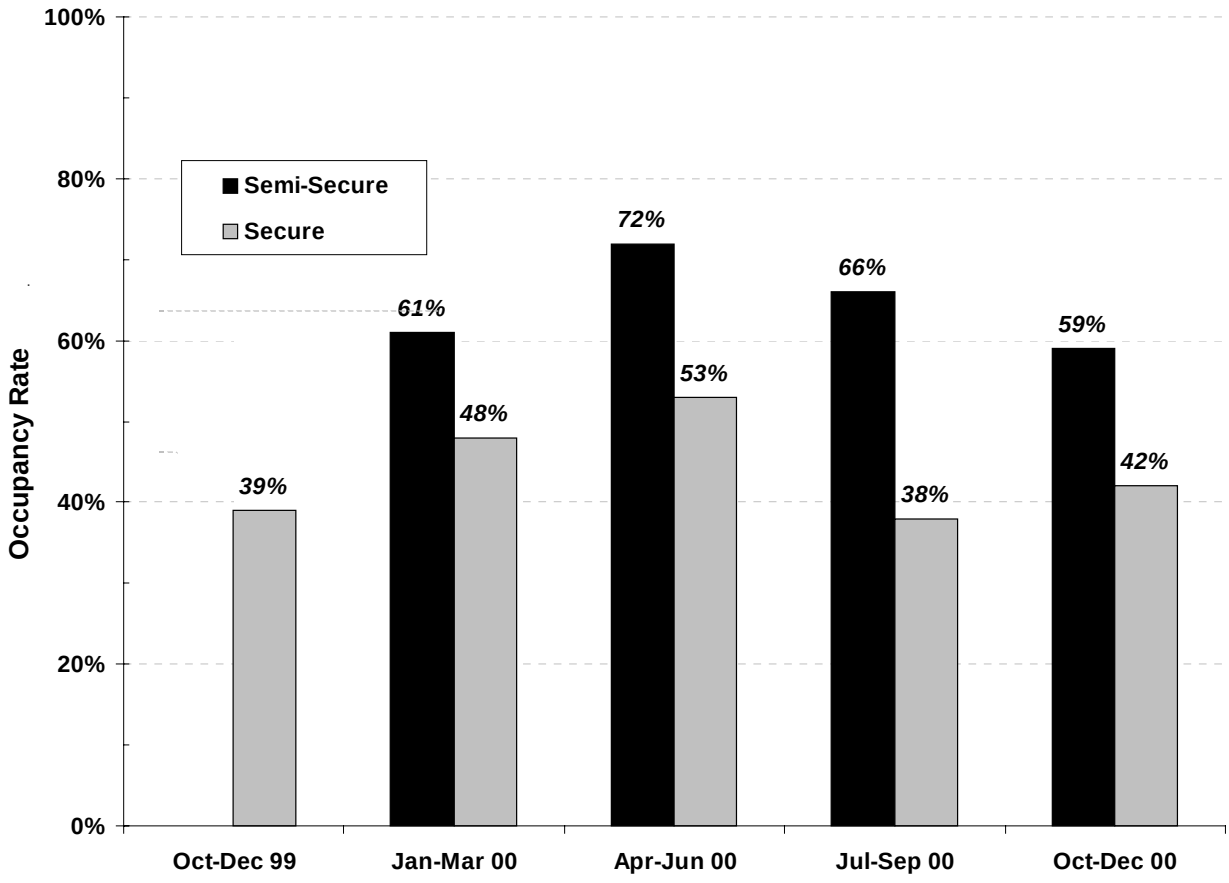
By law, youth may stay in CRCs for up to five days, although parents or guardians may pick them up sooner. Youth stay in semi-secure CRCs nearly two days longer than youth stay in secure CRCs, on average (4.2 vs. 2.5 days).

The occupancy rates of CRCs depend in part on the length of stay for youth who come to the facilities. The total number of intakes and frequency at which youth enter the centers also affects workloads. The next section explores the level of utilization for CRCs.

Occupancy Levels at Crisis Residential Centers

This section examines CRC average daily populations and utilization rates since October 1999.[1] Approximately 4,800 youth intakes occurred in both semi-secure and secure CRCs between October 1999 and December 2000 (see Figure 2). To analyze occupancy levels during this time period, we divided the number of *bed-days* (days where youth was in center) by the number of *available days* (total contracted beds multiplied by days in month). The results are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Quarterly Occupancy Rates of Crisis Residential Centers
October 1999–December 2000



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[1] The first secure CRC opened in May 1997 (EPIC-Yakima). However, prior to October 1999, there were only three secure CRCs in operation, making it difficult to make conclusions about overall utilization. Semi-secure CRCs have been in operation since 1980. Comparable data for these facilities, however, was not available until January 2000.

Variation in Occupancy Rates

As Figure 3 shows, semi-secure CRCs have the highest occupancy rate, ranging between 60 to 70 percent. Secure CRCs, in comparison, show a 40 to 50 percent occupancy rate. Within the statewide averages, however, a significant amount of variation exists. Table 4 outlines the average annual occupancy rates for each CRC in Washington. While the majority of semi-secure CRCs report high occupancy, only two secure CRCs have occupancy rates above 60 percent.

Table 4
CRC Occupancy Rates, by Facility (2000)

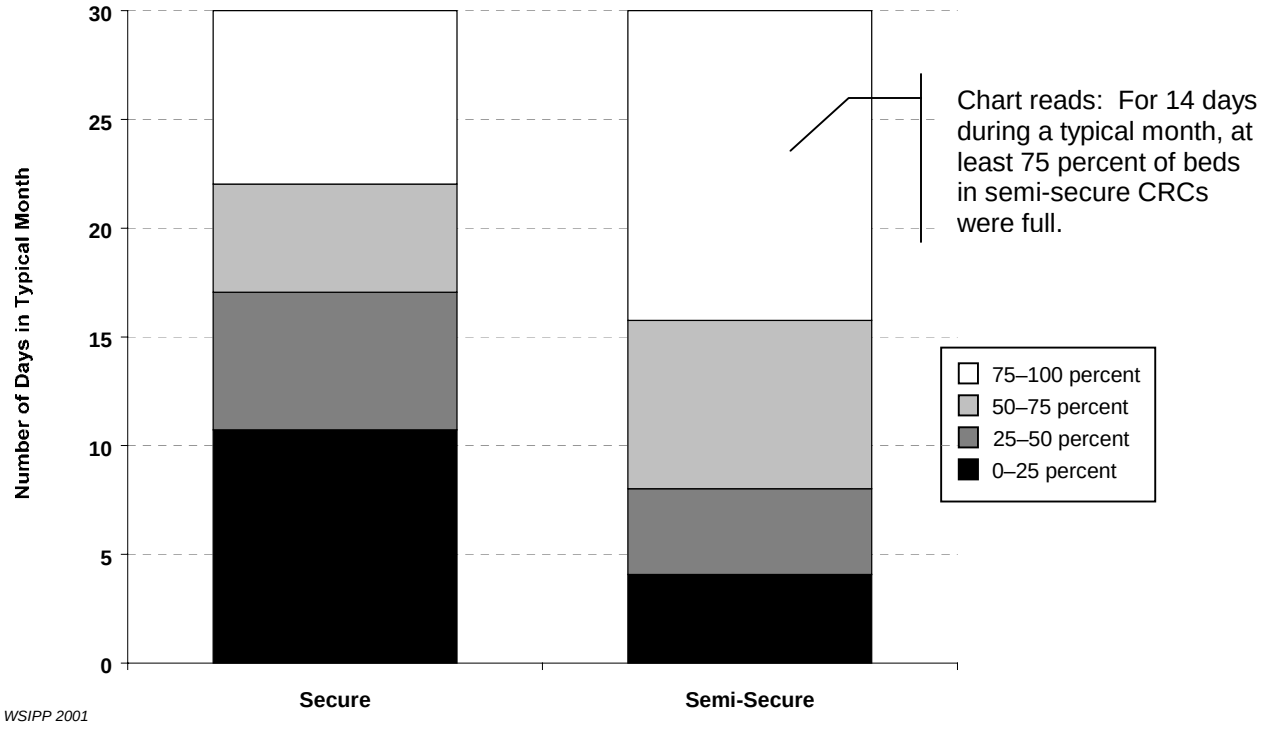
Occupancy Level	Secure Crisis Residential Centers	Semi-Secure Crisis Residential Centers
Low (0–30 percent)	Clallam Co. - Port Angeles DARTS Secure CRC - Everett Chelan Co. Center - Wenatchee Pioneer Secure CRC - Seattle	
Medium (31–60 percent)	Kennewick Secure Oak Grove - Vancouver Kitsap Co. - Port Orchard	Kennewick Semi-Secure Evergreen House - Everett Birch Bay House Spokane Yakima Semi-Secure
High (61–100 percent)	Daybreak - Spokane Yakima Secure	Tacoma CRC Kitsap CRC Haven House - Olympia South King Cty Youth Shelter Oak Bridge - Vancouver Serenity House - Colville Introspect - Seattle Chiliwist House - Omak

While several CRCs experience very high occupancy levels (90 percent), the volume at these centers means that, on occasion, they cannot take in runaway youth when all beds are full. Optimally, facilities would like to operate below a certain capacity so runaway youth are not turned away. On the other hand, continuously low levels of utilization can call into question how resources are allocated to serve runaway and at-risk youth. The next section examines an alternate definition of utilization levels in CRCs.

Utilization Rates

CRC staff expect an ebb and flow of youth coming in and out of the facility each month. Rather than averaging all stays during the month across available bed space, it may be more appropriate to look at highs and lows on any given day. Figure 4 shows the daily utilization level of secure and semi-secure CRCs over a typical 30-day period.

Figure 4
Crisis Residential Center Capacity Level by Days in Typical Month (2000)



As Figure 4 indicates, for 11 days out of every month in 2000, secure CRCs had a utilization rate below 25 percent. Semi-secure CRCs had significantly higher utilization levels: during half of a typical 30-day month, at least three out of every four beds were filled.

This methodology for analyzing CRC utilization rates also reveals significant variation by facility. Both methods produce similar rankings for usage levels across CRCs (see Table 4). Of course, factors other than utilization levels play a part in the decision to allocate CRC beds. Outcomes for CRC youth and parental support may also vary for each CRC. The Institute's final report in December will include a detailed analysis of a youth's status after leaving the crisis residential center.